

# *The* **BIG**

conversation 2015



*Don't Come, Won't Come?*

“There’s a galaxy of potential audiences orbiting our organisations, but so far evading our gravitational pull.”



## The wrong end of the telescope

*Research commissioned by Creative New Zealand should cause us all to stop, think and re-focus. Audience Atlas New Zealand is the largest national population survey into arts and cultural engagement ever undertaken in New Zealand. It gives us a unique overview of how New Zealanders perceive and respond to our arts offering. And it reveals that we may have been looking at the audience through the wrong end of the telescope.*

We now know that orthodox Arts Marketing is tightly focused on the short-term. It uses small budgets to drive attendance and/or ticket sales for something that's on now or very soon. That's what most arts marketers do in their day jobs. Not surprisingly, given these constraints, it makes sense to zoom in on the usual suspects: those who have been recently and/or to something similar. And, not surprisingly, these are the people who keep coming.

Yes, we advertise to the general public and we always get a few new attenders, but for the most part our lens is firmly focused on that usual, natural, core audience. But, turn the *Audience Atlas* telescope around for a wider view and we discover that there's a galaxy of potential audiences orbiting our organisations, but so far evading our gravitational pull.

## A shallow mass market

Arts and culture have undoubtedly become mainstream in New Zealand. *Audience Atlas New Zealand 2014* findings reveal that it's a mass market activity: almost everyone is attending or participating in *something* cultural. But few are doing it very often and even fewer are crossing over between artforms and genres. In short, New Zealand has a very shallow mass market.

If you like a challenge, this is good news! Far from arts and culture being a minority interest with a small market that we have already saturated, it seems that there is vast untapped potential. Huge numbers of New Zealanders report that they would be willing to try a wide range of artistic and cultural activities.

But here's the rub: they don't.

## Walk a mile in the audience's shoes

In the great decade-long audience development experiment we've all been involved in, we have so far proved one thing beyond doubt: that our orthodox Arts Marketing practices work brilliantly for corralling the usual suspects in our core audience, but they are hopelessly ineffective at converting the unconverted.

So, more of the same is not the solution. We need to understand *why* the audience doesn't come; walk a mile in their shoes and see our organisations through their eyes.

Here are **four provocations** designed to get us thinking like our potential audiences...

# PROVOCATION 1

## LEARN TO LOVE INFREQUENT ATTENDERS

We have developed a fetish for annualisation. Our budgets are annualised, our reporting to funders is annualised. We conceive our programmes as annual cycles. And so it is that we have attempted to project or even force this annualisation onto our audiences.

Orthodox Arts Marketing covets and lionizes the core, regular attender. After all, unless you are a major tourism attraction, they can often account for 80% of visits, tickets and visitor income. Our brochures present whole seasons of activity while our various subscriptions, season tickets, loyalty and membership schemes urge high-frequency visitation.

## Cascade of Disdain

But, conversely, orthodox Arts Marketing often cascades disdain on the occasional, infrequent and one-off attender. It's not uncommon to purge our mailing lists of those who have failed to re-attend and even more common not to target them with our communications on the grounds they are less likely to respond. When lists get large, the frequency and recency<sup>1</sup> of the usual suspects is favoured over the unfulfilled promise of the long-inactive, infrequent attenders.

Orthodox Arts Marketing has established annual attendance as an unofficial norm. Our 'real' audiences are the ones that visit with reassuring regularity. Backsliders are given another 12 months grace, but once they have stayed away for two years, they are perceived to be all but lapsed.

## The Rule of Thirds

Analysis of box office data confounds this common assumption. As a rule of thumb, only one-third of a typical audience database attends in any one year. And of those that do attend, only one third attends more than once. And of those that attend more than once, only one third attends more than twice. For those following the maths,

that puts the core audience at about 3% and the frequent audience at only 10%. As many as half of the 30% that attended once are unlikely to come back next year.

So, the truth is that infrequency is actually the norm and frequent attendance is abnormal. In fact, the average interval between visits may be around 27 months or, in other words, longer than the time we often allow before writing the person off as lapsed.

If an audience member aged 30-something attends your venue once every five years, they maybe have 10 more visits to make in their life-time. And along the way they will bring other people, talk about you and maybe even donate or buy something from you. If you sustained this relationship with the thousands who have visited you but apparently not been back, then you might very well be full. And if you can shorten that cycle from five to four years, you've just added 20% more visitors.

The current model of colonising and monopolising the loyalty and frequency of a small core of attenders locks us into a battle for market share with each other and limits us to subsistence level audience incomes generated from only 10% of our potential.

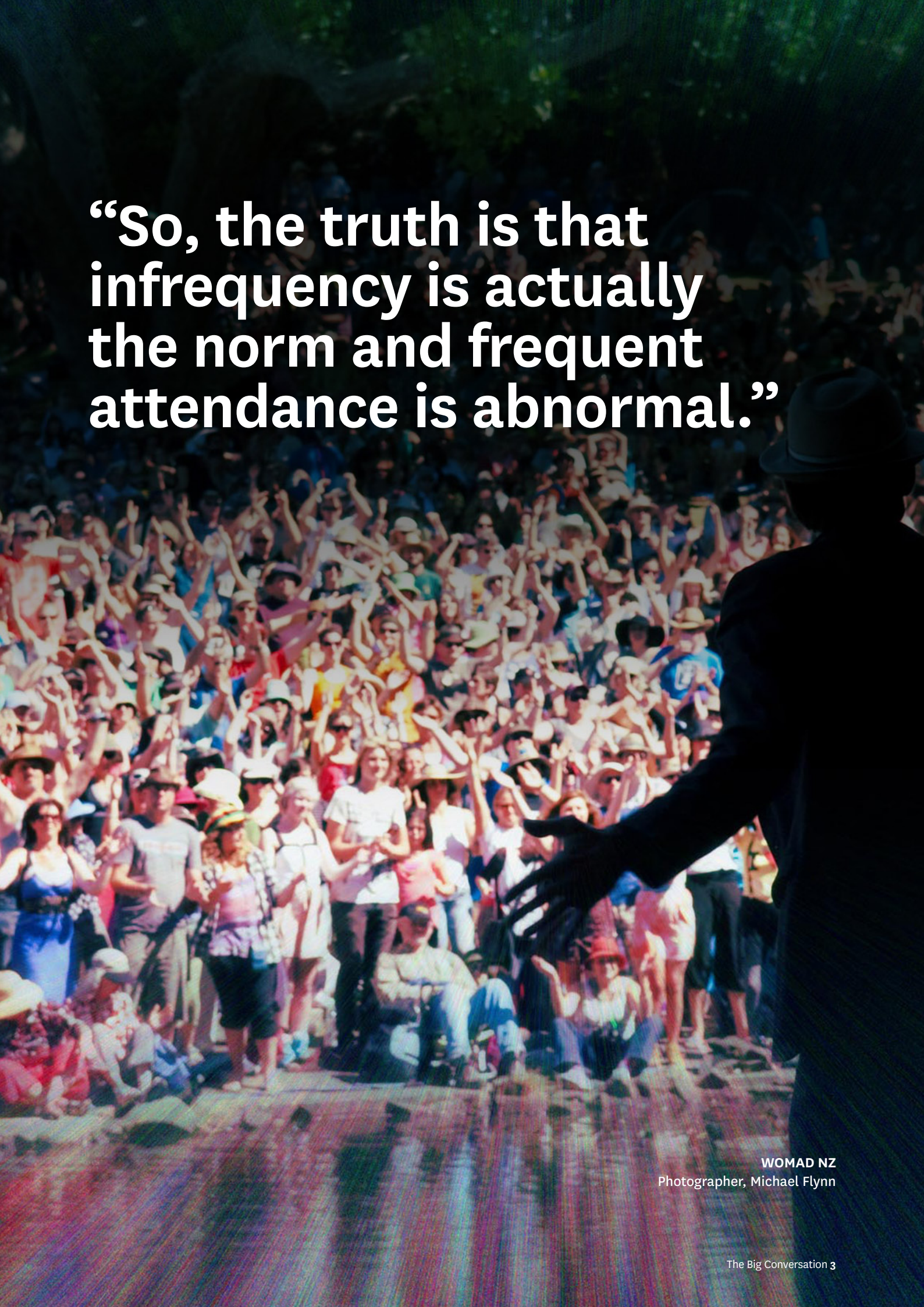
A new, shared audience model would allow us to accumulate more audience visits and more income from far more audience members, albeit less frequently. Arts organisations in New Zealand are already tapping in to the benefits of working collectively to grow the market. And pilot models supported by Creative New Zealand, such as the Auckland Audience Development and Christchurch Arts Audience Development projects are leading the way in developing a shared market. Ask audiences who've not visited us for four years and it's astonishing to hear the warmth of their remembered experiences and realise how much residual, latent brand equity<sup>2</sup> they still hold for us. They have not given up on us but we have often given up on them.

We undervalue the infrequent audience at our peril. If we learn to love them our long-term investment in their long-term cycles of occasional visitation will be repaid with interest and loyalty.

<sup>1</sup> How recently audiences attended.

<sup>2</sup> The value that audiences derive from their perception of your brand, rather than from the actual programmes or services you offer.



A large, diverse crowd of people is gathered outdoors, likely at a festival or concert. Many people are wearing hats and casual summer clothing. In the foreground, the back of a person wearing a dark hat and jacket is visible, with their right arm extended towards the crowd. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

**“So, the truth is that  
infrequency is actually  
the norm and frequent  
attendance is abnormal.”**

**WOMAD NZ**  
Photographer, Michael Flynn



## PROVOCATION 2

### RELEVANT PROGRAMMING'S BETTER THAN CLEVER MARKETING

*We all love a clever marketing campaign, one that reaches the parts other campaigns fail to reach.*

There's a myriad of top tips, cool tricks and perfectly executed tactics that buck the trend and deliver pockets of new audiences where there were none before.

Conference after conference shares these killer case studies that light the path towards converting non-attenders. Yet here we still are, getting by without the promised influx of new audiences. And there they still are, the non-attenders, doing what they do best: not attending. In fact their lives are fulfilled without us.

## Too Big a Job for Tactical Marketing

*Surely, if we all just copied these clever case studies the job would be done in next to no time.*

The fact that the job remains very far from done can only be down to one of two things: either we are not doing it right or maybe the task is too big for tactical marketing.

The evidence is firmly with the latter explanation. Clearly, tactical marketing, done well, can maximize and galvanize the immediate audience and attract those with a high propensity to try an artform or venue for the first time. Schemes like *Test Drive the Arts*<sup>3</sup> produce proven results.

But what about the audiences that are not simply waiting for the right invitation? In every artform there are non-attenders who do not rule it out, but who need more than the right communication. These people are generally seeking *relevance*: 'Why should I see this now?' And while we can craft messaging that makes the art

we're doing anyway appear more relevant, at some point maybe we need to offer something that actually is more relevant.

## Relevance is King

*Maybe that means being more relevant to your generation (however old you are), or more relevant to your cultural identity, environment, life experience or communities around you.*

But, overwhelmingly, just more relevant to the here and now. That doesn't always mean new work, but it does mean placing all work into a convincing context.

When the Western Australian Museum contemplated adding new content that explored contentious issues like immigration, the environment and Aboriginal rights, they thought it was the 'right' thing to do but that as the issues became more topical, the potential audience would shrink in lockstep with the perceived challenge.

Yet audiences said the exact opposite. Those who could see no relevance in a museum full of fossils, suddenly saw the Museum as relevant to their lives. And more than that, they implicitly trusted the Museum to deliver without fear or favour.

*New programming = new audiences.*

What will make ballet, dance, opera, visual art, musicals, films and plays more relevant? Do we need new ways of presenting our programmes, and maybe even new venues? Instead of targeting our contemporary work to the most engaged, maybe it could be engaging the legions of inert potential attenders?

<sup>3</sup> A scheme to introduce new audiences to the arts, *An invitation to Test Drive the Arts* <http://bit.ly/1HrUXOT>

## PROVOCATION 3

### HUMANS GET HUMANS

*In the age of computerised lists and internet channels we are in danger of reducing audiences to a quantifiable commodity.*

Where once we selected carefully for mailings, now we send one-size-fits-all email ‘blasts’. It doesn’t matter whether you want the e-newsletter, or that’s even the way you want to be communicated with, you’re getting one.

With clickable links and online booking we don’t even have to speak to the audience. And at most venues, you can walk in, see the art and leave without any human contact. And even if you do interact with a member of staff, for many organisations, they won’t be their staff anyway so audience and organisation remain buffered.

## The Art of Persuasion

*Very few audience members attend alone. So, most visits are the result of one person (the booker or decision maker) persuading at least one other person (friend, spouse, family member or colleague) to come too.*

Some of these successful persuasions may well be by text or email, but most will be face-to-face or at least via some kind of interactive *conversation*. And for every successful persuasion, there are many that fail simply because the booker has been unable to translate what we send into a compelling proposition.

Even in a world of high-speed digital communications, some organisations are working hard to create conversations with their audiences. Some of these dialogues may be digitally-assisted, but good old analogue is the heart and soul of this approach and often underrated.

## Creating Conversations

*Audiences are both surprised and delighted when an arts organisation reaches out. That might be a personal phone call, an encounter with an ambassador, an online chat or stumbling across us in the street.*

*It’s the human-to-human connection that is so powerful and so persuasive. Some organisations have harnessed their entire staff’s networks to evangelically spread the message and engage the disengaged.*

If you have your own staff army tasked with starting a dozen conversations each, then the ripples are felt all the way to the entrance door and the box office.

Once you’re doing the human thing it rubs off on your copywriting and communications – you start to sound like a well-informed and positive person advocating for something you love, rather than a desperate marketer trying to sell hundreds of empty seats.

## PROVOCATION 4

### DO IT DIGITALLY: NEW SPACES FOR ENGAGEMENT

*The world has moved online and so must we. If online is where the audience is, and where they are discovering ideas and content, we can't insist that they first come to a venue (and maybe buy a ticket) before they find out about us.*

People behave differently online, they range and explore, share and link in ways they cannot offline. They engage in dialogue with perfect strangers and with organisations in ways they wouldn't offline.

It's not enough for us to insert our messages into these spaces, to push digital rather than paper brochures or to make digital tannoy announcements using Twitter and Facebook as our megaphone. We need to become digital citizens, to listen as well as speak and to understand the evolving dynamics of online behaviour.

*This is about building genuine links not just collecting 'likes'.*

It's about rich, two-way dialogue that pulls non-attenders into our world, rather than the one-way, downward *push* marketing that awkwardly drops our pre-packaged messages into conversation betraying not just a lack of etiquette and protocol but a fundamental lack of social skills in this new social discourse.

But it's not just digital conversations that we need to cultivate. We need to make full use of digital channels for distribution and exchange.

Like all new developments, the fear has been that if you can see the images, listen to the audio or watch the video online, then it will quickly become a substitute for the real thing. But these fears are unfounded. *Audience Atlas New Zealand 2014* results show that 27% of the culture market have watched a recording or a live-stream of an arts, cultural or heritage event and, as a result, 56% said they were *more* likely to attend one of the company's shows in person. Rather than replacing offline experiences, online content is driving them.

Just like the explosion of digital music downloads has fuelled record demand to see live gigs and festivals, so exposure to digital content is driving interest in real-world visitation. From opera and theatre being streamed to cinemas, to live webcasts and digital downloads, there is a huge digital experiment taking place and it's winning new audiences and deepening the engagement of others.

As we've said analogue is the heart and soul of the art of persuasion but online and offline are not two distinct, separate worlds. Every organisation needs a comprehensive digital strategy that connects its real world and digital content, making full use of the technology to broaden appeal, and deepen engagement.





## The Challenge of Finding New Ways to Engage

*We want these four provocations to stimulate some invaluable discussion and the sharing of ideas and experiences. We've chosen these four because we believe that this is where much of the potential value lies.*

Anyone who's followed previous debates around non-attendance will no doubt see that we have sidestepped some of the usual topics. You'll notice that we have not once used the term 'barriers' as we have found it not to be very helpful.

While for some potential attenders there clearly are some very obvious factors preventing attendance and engagement like a lack of disability access, poor transport and extreme poverty – the 'barriers' concept applied outside of these specific instances suggests that people naturally want to attend the arts, are making efforts to do so but that something is actively repelling them.

All the research says that this simply isn't true. The same people who say that they would 'consider'

attending are happy for that to be a latent promise while they busy themselves doing (and enjoying) other things.

Research that says people are too busy or too stressed or that tickets are too expensive is flawed. The question is often little better than 'Which excuse for non-attendance would you like to give?' The very same people find time to go to bars and restaurants, watch rugby and pay astronomical prices for tickets to see recording artists.

For most of the potential audience, it's not the presence of barriers but the absence of engagement that results in non-attendance. Our provocations, therefore, all call for us all to find new ways to engage.

# The Big Conversation 2015 takes place in Wellington on 24 June.

*To book tickets and for further information visit:*



[www.creativenz.govt.nz/thebigconvo](http://www.creativenz.govt.nz/thebigconvo)

*This is the second Creative New Zealand Reader for The Big Conversation, it's worth downloading the previous reader from 2014 where we talked about the rise, some thirty-odd years ago, of orthodox Arts Marketing and how it has stifled, controlled and stylised conversations with audiences.*



<http://bit.ly/1hc7Qmj>

This paper is published by Creative New Zealand, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre and The Audience Connection as a reader for The Big Conversation 2015. The reader is intended to enrich a debate about the future of the sector and the conversation between art and audiences.

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